

ALGOL PROFILE

The image seems almost wrong at first, this modest and soft-spoken woman—a retired librarian with 20 years service dealing with books of others—living in an unpretentious house in central Florida. The area is almost rural in appearance. A lake edges the rear of the property, and in the expansive yard of a neighbor a horse grazes leisurely.

Yet this comfortable setting appears far too understated. For the woman is Andre Norton, a prolific writer of tightly plotted action stories and boldly imaginative science fiction.

By the end of this year, Andre Norton will have 80 books to her credit, with millions of copies in print. She has achieved the enviable position of receiving both critical acclaim and popular acceptance. Her inventive works of fantasy adventure have been compared to those of J. R. R. Tolkien and Edgar Rice Burroughs. Yet she still thinks of herself as basically just an old fashioned story teller.

The day seems right for a visit into Norton's carefully crafted fantasy worlds—a steady rain washes out the sounds of intruding reality and the gray clouds are somber and enveloping. Visitors are promptly inspected by her five cats, Su-Li, Mei Le Te, Punch, Frodo and Moses, and Norton's love of cats is evident even in the artwork and sculpture which decorate her home. A great variety of ceramic cats mingle on a shelf with small Wizard of Oz figures, and in several spots plaques in the shape of large feline faces glower mysteriously.

On a wall in the foyer, a map delineates the lands of *Witch World*, one of her most popular books and the start of an entire series of adventures. Fantasy art fills the small gaps between well-stocked book cases, and the overall appearance is of a very homey and slightly exotic library.

Magic plays such a key role in many of Norton's tales set in this world and others that a question about it can't be avoided. "Yes, I'm very much interested in the occult," she replies, "and not in what they call 'hard science'. I'm interested in what they call 'speculative archeology', which is the von Daniken type of thing, and I'm interested in ESP and things to do with the mind, more than gadgets—I'm not a gadget writer. I'm more interested in how people react to situations than the mechanical part of it."

Norton's ability to identify with people, to create believable characters even in alien surroundings, has earned her a large and loyal following. Even though many of her books are for children or teenagers, Norton says she has far more fan letters from adults than from younger readers.

The following extends worldwide, since her books have been translated



ANDRE NORTON

PROFILED BY

Gary Alan Ruse

into eight languages, Arabic included. Among the many awards she has received for her writing, perhaps the most unexpected was a special award from the Dutch government in 1946, sent in appreciation for her novel, *The Sword is Drawn*, which depicted the valiant efforts of the Dutch underground during World War II. Letters supplied by people in the Dutch resistance movement and other research led to a second book, *The Sword in Sheath*, published in 1949. Five years later the trilogy was concluded with *At Swords Points*.

The same kind of careful research and attention to detail went into a book written for the Civil War Centennial,

Ride Proud, Rebel!. "I came across an unpublished diary of a young man who had been a Morgan's raider," she explains. "He had gone south and joined the Confederate general, Forrest, and he had written a diary in very, very great detail. I drew upon that heavily for my book."

A second book traced the westward drift of Civil War veterans in the 1870's—men who had nothing left to return to except ruined land and families torn asunder. "That's what caused the great western advance right at the end of the Civil War, in the 1870's. You see, a lot of these men, the Northerners, could get state land. Just like the bounty land

after the Revolutionary War. For so many years of army service they might get land in the west. And the Confederates went because there was nothing left to go home to; they went mostly into New Mexico and Arizona, while the Northerners went into Colorado and Nebraska."

This second book, *Rebel Spurs*, was also partially inspired by the story of a real life rancher. When the army withdrew from New Mexico and Arizona at the outbreak of the war, the Apache Indians believed they had defeated them. In a few years they overran the region, and very few white men remained. But one rancher in a little town called Tubacca, which no longer exists, did not give up so easily. "He fortified his ranch," Norton explains. "He built a regular castle. And he hired the Pima Indians, who were enemies of the Apaches, to fight for him. His ranch was the only oasis of white safety in the area. He provided armed escorts for the train that came up from Mexico City, which was their only way of trade during the war. He became very famous for this, and I used him as one of the characters in the book—or rather, I used his background and what he did to develop the character."

Another novel based upon fact is due out this fall. Set in Africa, in the ancient Nile Valley country of Kush, the action of the novel is built around the African dynasty that inherited the declining Egyptian empire and rose to great power. According to legend, the city eventually fell to an Arab invasion and the nobility fled to the area of Lake Chad. With that kind of rich background as a starting point, Norton proceeds to develop a colorful and exciting adventure novel.

Norton's interest in the past goes back to childhood and her own ancestry. Born Alice Mary Norton in Cleveland, Ohio, her mother's family were bounty land people. "You know," she explains, "at the end of the Revolution they got the land as payment. Well, my mother's ancestor was in the Maryland line, and he helped found Zanesville on bounty land. He married an Indian, which was the first legal marriage between an Indian and a white in that part of the country, in order to get absolute control over the land that he wanted."

In high school she worked on the school paper as editor of the literary page, and stayed after school on her own time for a creative writing class. "We were very lucky in that we had an inspired teacher," she says. "Out of that class of about twelve people there came five professional writers—unusual for a class like that." At the end of the year they published a book of their stories and poetry through the school printing shop. But Andre Norton's writing career might have gone no further than that, if

not for the events of the early 1930's;

"I had no intention of becoming a professional writer at the time," she explains. "I was going to become a history teacher, but the depression hit and I went into the library. And then I took writing courses at the college at night. My first book, *The Prince Commands*, was brought out before I was 21."

More books followed, slowly at first, since she could only write in her spare time. And there was little of that. Besides working as an assistant librarian in Ohio, she also spent a year during World War II in the research section of the Library of Congress. Then in 1950, health problems forced an early retirement from library work. Norton turned her full-time attention to her avocation, and was soon writing up to four books a year. But the scope of her subject matter expanded to cover more than just the past.

"As I started producing more, it was at the same time that science fiction became saleable," she says. "So from then on I went into science fiction. Before that I had written spy stories and adventure stories and historical novels. Things of that kind. You see, you couldn't sell a science fiction book prior to 1951. The publishers were very dubious about risking a book. And then there came this great change, and from then on it was easier to sell."

Since then, she has had no trouble selling her science fiction adventures. If anything she's having trouble keeping up with the growing demand for her books.

Occasionally, Norton even collaborated with another writer, as she did for the novel *Murder For Sale*, published in 1954. The book was written with Allen Weston, pen name for Grace Hogarth. "I did the plotting, she did the writing," Norton explains. "She was living in England at the time and she wanted this for an English company. I have collaborated now six times. This time she worked from my notes, the other times I have worked from notes that the other people had written."

It sounds difficult, working from someone else's raw material, attempting to stay within the bounds set by another writer while still developing a story that is equally hers in its creation. Yet Norton did not consider it all that difficult. "It's rather interesting. You have their basic notes, and then you can see possibilities that you can expand upon."

Besides writing, Norton also spent eight years as an assistant editor at Gnome Press. It was during this time that she wrote two novels, *Plague Ship* and *Sargasso of Space*, under the pseudonym of Andrew North. By odd coincidence, both of these novels were pirated by the Russians and the French—translated and published illegally without regard to copyright or royalties. It is

typical of Norton's calm approach to things that she regards the incident with amusement today, especially the foreword which the Soviet government deemed necessary for one of the books, explaining how the story was *really* a statement against the evils of capitalism!

When asked about the use of the name *Andre*, she explains, "It was necessary when I started writing because I've always written books that were first considered boy's or men's books. And in those days, a woman did not. You'll find that all the early women writers, like C. L. Moore and Leigh Brackett either used their initials or a pseudonym. And I've used it so long now that it's become my name. It is, legally." She also points out an ironic twist to what may be considered a chauvenist policy in publishing—men who write gothic romance novels are generally required to write under a *female* pseudonym.

Norton's ideas for stories come from her own interests, as a rule. Her research into travel, history, archeology, folklore and occult matters continually serves as the springboard for new books. It is easy to be caught up in her special kind of story telling magic as she relates tantalizing bits of information and scientific oddities...the storage batteries that were found in a three thousand year old Sumerian tomb; the fossilized footprints of a man that date back to long before any human being was supposed to have walked this earth; odd statues found in Mexico that show prehistoric animals that the natives could not have known unless they actually saw them; and a viking tale that may be more than mere legend.

"There was an Icelandic saga that was almost dismissed as being entirely a fantasy, in which they told about sailing so far south that the stars appeared on the wrong side. And then they started north again and they met these people that had queer boats with claw-like sails and had a fight with them," she says. "Well, that was almost dismissed as fantasy. Now we understand—they rounded South Africa, those Vikings did, and the people that they met were from Borneo, that have the lateen sails. Now we know that, because we can put together what we know with what they say."

Besides her own research, Norton sometimes has the assistance of others. "I have one correspondent who sent me an extremely interesting thing," she relates. "He has a sea-going boat that he can run by himself, and he will tie up in a port and work for awhile until he gets enough money to go off. Well, he's made friends all over the world, and he had a letter from a friend in Australia who has a sheep ranch in the outback, right on the edge of the desert. And there was a very odd formation there. It was a mound, and up from the mound was this point of rock, and it was so

noticeable that they used it for a camp and a landmark. Well there was a rain, which doesn't usually occur in that area and an earth slippage showed that the pinnacle was on top of a roof of blocks. And the man who owned the property did everything to try to get an archeologist to come there and investigate it. He petitioned the universities in Australia and he wrote to archeologists—nobody would pay any attention to it. Now, Australia is supposed to have no ancient remains, the people are supposed to be drifters. Yet the aborigines themselves have some peculiar drawings on the rock, and some legends of a white race that preceeded them, that *did* build."

In Norton's estimation, the find is comparable to the submerged roads and walls found recently off Bimini. "Apparently there might have been a very high civilization before the ice-age," she says with conviction, "or before the world catastrophe that we know occurred about 10,000 B.C., a terrible world catastrophe, which appears in legends all over the world as a flood."

But even Norton's research can't account totally for the success of her books. In the final assessment, it is her vivid imagination and the people that are so skillfully woven into her fantasy tales—wizards and witches and brave warriors, colorful and exciting people who never-the-less have emotions enough like ours that we may identify with them and cheer them on in their adventures. No small magic, that.

Outside, the rain is still pelting down into the enclosed patio of Norton's home—a house designed by the architect husband of her neice. Norton moved to Florida in the fall of 1966 primarily because of her neice, but she also admits that she couldn't take the cold winters of Ohio any more.

The cats, which have been distressed by the steady rain, are now pacing about nervously. And for good reason, as it turns out, since the local veterinarian soon arrives to give them their annual shots.

Those very same cats are, one suspects, directly responsible for a number of recent Norton books. *Catseye*, for one; *The Jargoan Pard* for another, in which a young man in the ancient land of Arvon discovers he has the ability to change into feline form; and *Iron Cage* as well, which opens with the earthly mistreatment of a cat and then proceeds to depict a world in which humans are treated no better by their superior animal masters.

The vet leaves and the talk returns to less mundane matters. One of Norton's new books is *Red Hart Magic*, another of the "Magic" series of stories that have delighted readers (*Steel Magic*, *Octagon Magic*, and *Dragon Magic*, to name a few). This new tale centers around a miniature inn, while past

books used such items as a doll house and an herb garden as the starting points for their fantasy adventures.

Another new one is *Wraiths of Time*, and Norton has finished a new book for Walker entitled *Star Ka'at World*. Those fans of Norton's *Witch World* series, and they are legion, should look for a collection of *Witch World* short stories, *Trey of Swords*, due soon from Ace. Those same fans will also be pleased to know that Gregg Press has issued the original *Witch World* books in a special hard-bound set complete with maps.

When questioned about her prodigious output, Norton commented, "When I was working full-time, I could only bring out a book once every two years, because I had to write in little snippets of time, rather than steadily as I do now. Since then I've been doing four a year, up until this year." She is also quick to correct the impression that all four novels are full-blown projects. "They vary, though. You see, some of them are for younger children, and they're short. I usually do about two full length novels a year, and the others are shorter. I've been doing some for the Walker line, for very young readers—eight to ten years old. And then the Magic Series for the ten to twelve readers. Those are short, too."

Fiction is her primary interest. In fact, her only non-fiction work has con-

sisted of articles about the SF field. Another area of writing Norton has scrupulously avoided is the short story. "I don't write many of them, and I don't do it easily. The very short story is difficult for me because I think in longer terms, and plan in longer lengths. There are only a few writers I know that ever started with books instead of short stories, but they all have the same difficulty—short stories are very hard."

In the meantime, more projects are in the works, including, hopefully, a tale set in the Florida Keys. But for those readers interested in sampling Norton's special style of magic, they needn't be content with only new or recent titles. One of the benefits of writing tales with strong historical backgrounds is that they are truly timeless.

One such story, *Scarface*, was originally published in 1948. "It's a pirate story," Norton explains, "and it's the result of a great deal of research on the pirates that operated out of Tortuga in the very early 18th century. It's partly based on the accounts of a Dutch doctor who was captured by the pirates, and kept because he was the only man with medical knowledge. It's also based on the story of Henry Morgan, the British buccaneer who became governor of Jamaica." A delightful smile lights up her face. "That's still selling, by the way . . . very well." ■

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